Colonial Girlhood: An Introduction

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Settler colonies and colonies of occupation, such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India, Ireland, South Africa, and the Caribbean, held out the possibility for girls to experience freedom from, and the potential to reconfigure, British norms of femininity. This special issue of the *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies* on colonial girlhood seeks to examine how colonial girlhood was constructed and redefined in colonial texts and cultures. It also explores the transnational influence of these ideologies of girlhood as they circulated throughout the British empire and elsewhere. The topic of colonial girlhood engages with intersecting ideas about gender, youth and empire and encourages a variety of disciplinary approaches. At the "Colonial Girlhood/Colonial Girls" conference held at the University of Melbourne in June 2012, from which this special issue arises, more than fifty scholars presented papers from fields including History, Literary Studies, Education, Anthropology, Art History, Creative Arts and Cinema Studies.

Colonial girls occupied – and continue to occupy – an ambivalent and sometimes contested position in British and settler societies. They were sometimes seen as a destabilising force that challenged conventional expectations of girls or as a disruption that could, and must, be contained. The writings of British-born settlers about and for girls, which were usually published in England but were then transported to the colonies, contributed a further degree of complexity to the developing picture of the colonial girl. These texts both perpetuated and occasionally challenged British imperial and gender ideologies, reflecting loyalties torn between "home" and new dominions. White settler girls correspondingly often simultaneously identified as both British and colonial, and attempts were made to position indigenous girls as British subjects as well.

Recent scholarship has begun to explore the role of gender in the development of the metropole and the colony. As Angela Woollacott explains in *Gender and Empire* (2006), gender played a central role in the British imperial enterprise, "both as one of the forces driving and shaping the empire, and as a set of ideologies produced at once in the colonies and the metropole that constituted shifting and pervasive imperial culture" (1). In her edited collection on *Gender and Empire* (2007), Philippa Levine similarly observes that the British empire "always seems a very masculine enterprise," but such a depiction "obscures both colonized populations…, and the growing numbers of colonizing women who also lived and worked in colonial settings" (1). Attending to the colonial girls who emigrated, lived, and worked in white settler societies – in fiction and in reality – enables us to add a further dimension to histories of femininity in the British empire.

Across national boundaries, the malleability of colonial girlhoods is evident. In British print culture, Indian girls were often represented as victims of an unenlightened culture that offered poor educational opportunities, and Irish girls were frequently "hot-headed" and untamed. In each national context, the workings of colonialism produced different models of idealised girlhood, from which Indigenous girlhoods were often marginalised. This edition concentrates on Australian and New Zealand girls of white settler societies, but the stories of Indigenous colonial girls are increasingly being recovered and form an important part of our forthcoming edited collection *Colonial Girlhood in Literature, Culture and History, 1840-1940* (Palgrave, 2014).

Crucially, the empire itself was in a state of dramatic flux across what is often called Britain's "imperial century" (Hyam). The empire grew substantially in size and in population in the nineteenth century and its expansion was integral to eventual movements toward independence for white settler societies. Yet it is also important to recognise that the workings of colonialism had lingering effects beyond the years in which former British colonies gained independence. In order to explore different kinds of colonial girls across time and to take account of how girlhood came to be affected by the growth of nationalism and internationalism, this special edition also includes articles that explore colonial girlhood up until the inter-war period. Both "colonial" and "girl" can be vexed terms within the discourses of colonial girlhood. As girlhood scholars, such as Sally Mitchell, Catherine Driscoll, and Anita Harris, have demonstrated, definitions of the "girl" can vary based on age, marital status, race, and class.[1]

This special issue reflects some of these varied understandings of "girlhood" since we include different types of girls including teenage emigrants, fictional Australian girls of the bush, actresses, working-class girls, and fantasies of youthful femininity embodied by the figure of the fairy. These girls reflect complex engagements with British and colonial ideals. The tension between them often intersects with ideas of the nation. As a consequence, the "colonial" girl can be notoriously slippery, engaging as she does with competing ideals emerging from Britain and the colonies. For example, in Lilja Sautter's article on girls' shipboard diaries of the early 1880s, we see that the girl emigrant's journey from Britain to New Zealand can be seen as a liminal space in which traditional British feminine ideals were contested and redefined during her trip to the colony. The three girls' diaries that Sautter discusses variously adhere to a "useful" imperial feminine ideal, in which bravery, adventure and health are emphasised, and a more traditional moral and maternal role.

The "colonial girl" could also be exported and sold to other markets. Desley Deacon explores this idea in her discussion of the development of elocution training for girls and women from private accomplishment to public performance in Australia from the 1880s. She argues that the "marketable skills" taught to colonial girls through elocution helped to launch the careers of several Australian actresses who succeeded in Hollywood. Ellen Warne furthers the analysis of transnationalism in her examination of how notions of working-class girlhood, in particular, were often developed through international associations such as the Young Women's Christian Association. She focuses on the inter-war period to demonstrate how the YWCA worked to decrease its ties to Britain and to "'safely' transform 'colonial girls' into 'world citizens.'"

While, as Sautter's archival research suggests, surviving records of actual colonial girls' voices are rare – even among the white, middle-classes – there are a variety of visual and textual ways to read and understand the colonial girl. Articles by Caroline Campbell and Anita Callaway interpret two very different kinds of visual representations of femininity produced in Australia. Campbell explores John MacFarlane's illustrations for Mary Grant Bruce's long-running "Billabong" series to demonstrate the girl's centrality in the development of a model of distinctly Australian femininity. Bruce's novels, Campbell argues, position the heroine, Norah, as independent and equal to men, while MacFarlane's depictions of her rural and urban adventures construct her as "a modern alternative" to the masculine bush heroes of popular culture. Callaway similarly explores a vision of modern femininity in her examination of artist Ida Rentoul Outhwaite's construction of an Australian "Fairyland." Outhwaite's fairies, Callaway suggests, are entirely distinct from those of Victorian Britain

and enable the representation of "girlish dreams" that were otherwise excluded from the masculinist canon.

The colonial girls discussed in these articles reflect the complexities of defining either the "colonial" or the "girl." They emphasise that the boundaries between the imperial and the colonial, the girl and the woman, the national and the transnational are porous. Yet in attempting to think about these girls and how they were represented textually and visually, we are able to develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of "the material realities and discursive practices" (Bettis and Adams 9) through which girlhood was – and is – constructed.

Notes

[1] See, for example, Sally Mitchell's *The New Girl: Girls' Culture in England, 1880-1915* (New York: Columbia UP, 1995), Anita Harris' *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), and Catherine Driscoll's *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002).

Works Cited

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